



# RSVP Connections

Connecting Senior Volunteers with Community Needs  
Winter 2007

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## **“Pass It On. Mentor a Child.”**

January 2007 is National Mentoring Month. The Corporation for National and Community Service (the federal agency that funds RSVP and other national service programs) wishes to highlight the need for more mentors and encourage more people to become mentors who can help youth from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their potential. Millions of children and youth are on waiting lists for mentors in many different programs.

You yourself may have been fortunate to have had a mentor at some point. Your mentor may have been an exceptional teacher, the coach of an athletic team, a supervisor at work, or a family member. In whatever role, the mentor provided you with guidance and support when you went through a difficult period, faced new challenges, or worked to improve some aspect of your life. When you make difficult decisions, even now you may recall the words of guidance that your mentor would have offered.

Many young people today have a desperate need for positive adult role models. Children's lives are impacted by social trends and economic shifts that have resulted in changing family constellations, a growing number of families where both parents have to work as well as single parent families, and quality child care which is scarce and often unaffordable. These and other factors greatly reduce the time that a parent, grandparent, or other adult role model is available to spend time with a child.

While a volunteer mentor cannot fill in all the gaps in the life of a child or young person, research shows that having a mentor decreases the likelihood that disadvantaged youth will engage in violent behavior and drug use, while improving the chances that they will attend school regularly and improve academically.

Mentors need not be teachers, child psychologists, or social workers... There are two basic requirements:

**The first is a commitment of time.** Mentors are usually asked to commit time each week for at least one year. Having a reliable mentor who shows up when he or she is supposed to provides youth with consistency and dependability that is often lacking in their lives.

**The other quality is patience.** Often a mentor wants to observe dramatic results overnight as a result of their involvement and efforts. But it sometimes takes much longer to begin to see positive results.

This newsletter highlights mentoring opportunities in Erie County. You'll read about the experience and reflections of 3 volunteers now serving as mentors. If you know someone who might be a good candidate to help a younger person by becoming a volunteer mentor, please share this newsletter with them. That way, you can help to “Pass It On: Mentor a Child”!

*Pat Dowling*

RSVP Coordinator

## Mentors—Making Returns to the Community by Investing Time and Caring

RSVP volunteer Anne Gayley is a star on the local stage. Her days are often filled with rehearsals, and her evenings with performances. In 2006, this talented actress won an Artie Award for her supporting role in *The Cocktail Hour* at the Kavinoky Theater.

Since October 2005, Anne has starred in another supporting role--as mentor to a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student. Anne volunteers at the Enterprise Charter School through the school-based mentoring program coordinated by **Literacy Volunteers of Buffalo & Erie County**. Anne meets with her "mentee" twice a week at the school for about 40 minutes at lunchtime. They may spend time drawing and coloring pictures, reading stories, playing board games, or talking about the day.

Each volunteer mentor works closely with Literacy Volunteers staff. At an initial training session, volunteers receive all the raw materials they will need to work successfully with a student including information about learning styles, learning disabilities, and literacy development. They also are provided with an array of resources they can use during mentoring sessions, particularly activities related to literacy development. Literacy Volunteers staff also provides ongoing training sessions on various topics related to mentoring.

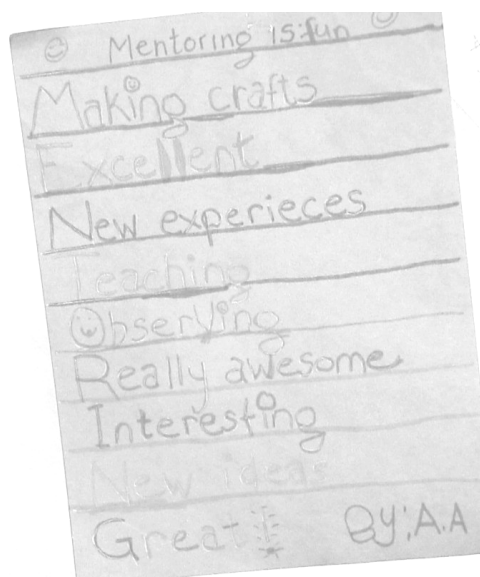
Mentoring is not just homework help, and the purpose is not to "fix" a troubled child. "This is a strength-based approach" explained Sherry Byrnes, coordinator of Literacy Volunteers' school-based mentoring program. "Each child has an enormous amount of potential that can be

developed. The adult mentor brings in a wealth of experience and skills. We encourage mentors to incorporate their own interests, skills and creativity in their approach. The goal is to help the child to develop a love of reading and learning, and this can be reached in many different ways."

Anne does just that by using her theater background as part of literacy activities. "My mentee knows that I am an actress, and she is interested in acting too. So instead of just reading a book, we'll make it into a play and act it out." Anne and her mentee even "starred" on camera together as part of a Literacy Volunteers video to recruit new mentors.

The main ingredient for the success of the mentoring relationship though, is not so much what the mentor does, but that he or she is there for the child. Consider the following experience of RSVP volunteer and retired UB administrator Barbara Mierzwa, who has been meeting with her mentee at the Enterprise Charter School for about 3 months. Barbara has built upon her mentee's love of drawing and coloring to engage her in literacy activities such as writing a short story

to accompany a picture that the girl has drawn. One day, the 11-year-old girl mentioned she would like to own a lime green Hummer. When Barbara went home, she looked online at a Hummer website to check whether Hummer or other car companies made a lime green vehicle.



Poster created by Anne's Mentee spells out what mentoring means: Making crafts, Excellent, New experiences, Teaching, Observing, Really awesome, Interesting, New ideas; Great

When she met with her mentee the next time, Barbara told her what she found out. “She was just amazed and said, ‘You remembered what I said!’ I think that for the child, it is so important that an adult is making time just for them and really listening to what they say.”

There is a tremendous need for more men to volunteer as mentors, because many young boys are growing up without a father present in the home. Allen Geisler is a volunteer mentor through a site-based mentoring program of **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Buffalo & Erie County**. For the past year, this busy sales representative has met with his 7th-grade mentee at the Seneca Babcock Community Center. The two often spend the hour playing board games such as Connect Four. They may talk about the Buffalo Bills or a video game. Allen’s 7<sup>th</sup> grade mentee wasn’t sure at first whether it was “cool” to have a mentor -- until he met Allen. “It’s really fun to have a mentor. I can’t always spend time with my brother, so this is like having another brother.” Joel Monahan, Director of the Site-Based Mentoring Program for Big Brothers Big Sisters, explains that like many other mentors, Allen often wondered whether he was doing enough. “I explained that we’re not there to fix or cure a child. We’re there as support, like “an arm around the shoulder.”

Before a mentor-mentee match is made, there is a detailed application, screening, and interview process for both the adult volunteer and the child. In order to ensure that a match will be successful, the staff carefully considers personality styles, shared interests, and expectations of the mentoring relationship. In every case, the child’s parent or guardian must give permission for the child to have a mentor. Site-based programs also ensure that agency staff is always present and available during the mentoring session to provide extra support or offer direction.

In each program, the mentor is asked to make a commitment of one year (a school-year in some cases). To a volunteer mentor, this commitment is worth the rewards. Anne had thought for a long time about becoming a mentor, and is glad that she finally made the decision. “Don’t tell yourself you don’t have time. You can make the time. If you can make a difference in the life of a child, that’s more precious than pearls.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 1 out of 10 children experiences four or more of the following factors: not living with two parents, having an under-employed parent, having a parent or guardian who is a high school dropout, living below the poverty line, receiving welfare benefits, and/or having no health insurance.

Any one of these factors increases the likelihood of negative outcomes for children, but the presence of four or more places the child at a tremendous risk of failure.

7.1 million children fall into this high-risk category.

If you’re having difficulty volunteering because of an inability to drive, perhaps RSVP’s van can be of assistance—call us at 858-7548.



## More unique and exciting roles for volunteer mentors:

### **...To build students' interest in science....ScienceFirsthand:**

Take an adult who is interested in nature or scientific investigation. Add a young person who wants to continue learning outside of the classroom---and you have the core of the ScienceFirsthand. In weekly orientation sessions, participants meet at a community center to get to know each other while exploring the environment around the center, catching insects, drawing trees, digging in dirt. They make tools to collect evidence, experiment with batteries and magnets indoors, and use a field journal to record what they saw, did, and wondered about. They find out what “doing science” is really about. Participants also meet working scientists who help them think about how to ask questions and carry out investigations. The mentor-mentee teams meet weekly at the center, on a schedule that they set. Staff offer useful materials and equipment when needed and help the teams to narrow down the questions that they will investigate through experiments or observations. After a year of time spent observing, questioning, experimenting, and conferring with scientists, the teams prepare to tell each other their investigations at a city-wide Young Investigators Conference. Here, mentors and mentees celebrate their achievements, and contemplate continuing their adventures in science next year.

The original Mentor is a character in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. When Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted care of his kingdom to Mentor. Mentor served as teacher and overseer of Odysseus' son. Today's mentor is an individual, usually older, always more experienced, who helps and guides another individual's development.

### **...To welcome/assist refugees starting a new life-Family Mentor Program:**

If you have ever moved to a new town, you may have received a visit from some friendly volunteers known as the “Welcome Wagon”. They brought with them a small housewarming gift, a map of the area, and lots of tips about places to eat, shop, and go for entertainment. The Welcome Wagon eased the way for you to begin in a new place. Like Welcome Wagon volunteers, the **International Institute** is seeking volunteers or small teams to provide a welcome and helping hand for new families through those first difficult weeks of transition. A new refugee family must find ways to begin life not only in a new city, but also a new country and new culture. Almost as soon as they arrive in the US, refugee families must begin to learn English, find a place to live and a job, enroll children in school, learn where and how to buy food and clothing, and many other tasks we take for granted. Those first difficult weeks can be made considerably easier by the presence of one or more people familiar with the city, and who are willing to take time to act as friendly guides for the new family.

Mentors are asked to commit about 8 hours per week for approximately 2 months to assist a new family. Mentors can be among the first people to greet the new family at the airport. Mentors and refugees share experiences such as a first visit to a supermarket, mall, or library, a holiday or birthday celebration, or just an afternoon sightseeing around the area.



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**Mark your new calendar for Friday, September 28 as 2007 Tribute Day—Remember, volunteers must have at least 20 hours of signed timesheets to be invited.**

### **... To support women entering the new world of motherhood... The Priscilla Project**

Imagine expecting a baby, and at the same time moving to a new country where you arrive with very few belongings, do not speak the language, or know the culture. Finding a home, a doctor, supermarket, pharmacy, or necessities for the baby become almost insurmountable and daunting tasks. You may have a difficult time understanding the doctor's questions and instructions, reading a prescription label, or finding the right bus route to get to an appointment. Refugee women, or other at-risk women, facing such situations---who are pregnant or have a new baby-- are a target group to be served by "The Priscilla Project". Many have recently arrived with their families from countries such as Rwanda, Somalia, and places where they experienced years of tremendous hardship and oppression, and have obtained legal permission by the State Department to come to the US. Other women served by the project are identified as being at risk because they are very young, in poverty, or in difficult living situations.

A volunteer mentor will help the new mother understand and negotiate the complexities of the health care system, so that she can have a healthy pregnancy and healthier baby. The volunteer maintains frequent contact, accompanying her to important appointments when possible, and letting the case manager know about the mother's progress and needs. This may be an ideal match for women who are compassionate, have strong communication skills and are excited to work with women of different cultures, perhaps for whom English is not a first language. Volunteers should have a basic understanding of where hospitals are located and how to make appointments. In a 3-part orientation, volunteers develop a basic understanding about the refugee experience, cross-cultural issues, and medical issues, including HIPPA laws regarding patient confidentiality. They can attend support groups and share experiences with other mentors.

The Priscilla Project is planned to start in March. as a collaboration between Journey's End Refugee Services and Jericho Road Ministries to reach out with medical care and social services to women in need on Buffalo's East and West Side.

If interested in any of these mentoring opportunities, please call RSVP at 858-7548.

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**Please fill out a timesheet each time you volunteer at your site.** Each month, timesheets should be signed by the volunteer and the site supervisor and sent to RSVP's office. Even if you do not request mileage reimbursement, it is important for all active RSVP volunteer to complete timesheets. If you don't know where the timesheet is, ask your site supervisor, or contact the RSVP office at 858-7548. We rely on our volunteers to keep track of hours for program reports, volunteer awards, and of course, Tribute Day!

**Have a new address, phone number or email?** Please contact the RSVP office (858-7548 or [dowlingp@erie.gov](mailto:dowlingp@erie.gov)) so that we can update our records. RSVP sends e-mail notices to volunteers about new or one-time volunteer opportunities. We promise not to send jokes or chain messages!

## WELCOME NEW RSVP VOLUNTEERS...WE'RE GLAD YOU JOINED US

Jane B. Albrecht, Phyllis J. Altman, Phyllis N. Andre, Ronald J. Andre, Robert W. Baker, Alice Bienko, Maribel L. Broffman, Helen Z. Camp, Rosemond G. A. Causley, Mary Compagnoni, Phyllis M. Conway, Caroline M. Cronin, Arlene M. Davis, Barbara J. Denk, Paul E. Donovan, Elaine Driscoll, Nicholas J. Driscoll, Raymond K. Dusza, Hazel M. Eldridge, Mary Jean Evenick, Paul H. Farrell, JoAnn M. Feuz, Kathy C. Fiorello, Robert L. Fisher, Loraine H. Galley, William G. Galley, Janet E. Gengo, Deborah A. Gick, Diane M. Goupil, Maggie M. Hayman, Ruth A. Heiler, Ann M. Hergenroder, Martin R. Jones, Ann B. Kellman, Delilah L. King, William R. McSkimming, Lorraine A. Mergi, Robert S. Miller, Juanita M. Nowak, Patricia A. Nowak, Barbara A. Ode, Margaret A. Ortman, Eleanor I. Pagels, Marilynn J. Pinkoski, Robert E. Preston, Kathleen B. Ray, Ruth W. Reading, Hilda G. Rodler, Carolyn M. Romanowski, Dorothy J. Rosche, Richard C. Rosche, Bonnie Schoenthaler, Ruth M. Seitz, Donald C. Trautman, Caroline Ungaro, Eileen J. Wagner, James A. Wagner, Rita Wagner, Carlton A. Witt, Dolores M. Wojdan, Darrell D. Young, Judith E. Young, Jacqueline J. Ziolkowski, Maria Zoyhofski



**NEW VOLUNTEER ORIENTATION:** What does RSVP mean? What kinds of volunteer opportunities can you find through RSVP? What are the benefits of being an RSVP volunteer? How do I request mileage reimbursement? For answers to these questions, and others you might have, be sure to attend an upcoming RSVP orientation session. **All new volunteers are asked to attend a session as soon as possible after enrolling with RSVP.** Bring along a spouse, sibling, or best friend, and find out about ways to get involved in the community through RSVP! Orientation sessions are held at sites throughout the County to make it easier for volunteers to attend. The schedule of upcoming RSVP orientations is below:

Fri., February 23 1:30 pm at Town of Tonawanda Sr. Center, 291 Ensminger Rd.

Tues., March 6 1:30 pm at West Seneca Sr. Center, 4620 Seneca St.

Thurs., March 22 10:00 am at Concord Nutrition (Fire Hall), 405 W. Main St., Springville

Fri., March 30 1:30 pm at Clarence Senior Center, 4600 Thompson Rd.

Wed., April 11 9:30 am at Amherst Senior Center, 370 John James Audubon Pkwy.

Thurs., April 26 10:00 am at Literacy Volunteers of Bflo & Erie Co., 1313 Main St., Buffalo

Thurs., May 3 10:30 am at Town of Evans Sr. Ctr., 999 Sturgeon Point Rd., Derby

**Please let us know if you'll attend—858-7548.**

Do you have questions about services and programs for older adults?

**Erie County Department of Senior Services can help—Call 858-8526.**

Information about many programs and services are also available on the web at  
[www.erie.gov/depts/seniorservices](http://www.erie.gov/depts/seniorservices)



## A tip of the hat to these great RSVP volunteers....

**Richard Reading**, a 15-year volunteer at the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park, was presented the Bos'n Marvin Curry Award for exceptional service. Richard is a docent at the Naval Park, and also has done restoration and maintenance work on the ships. His work has been particularly beneficial for a group of World War II veterans known as the "Tin Can Sailors" (the nickname given to destroyers because of their relatively thin hulls). The group travels to the Park annually to help maintain and restore their beloved ship, and can now "live on ship" during their stay, in part due to Richard's hard work.

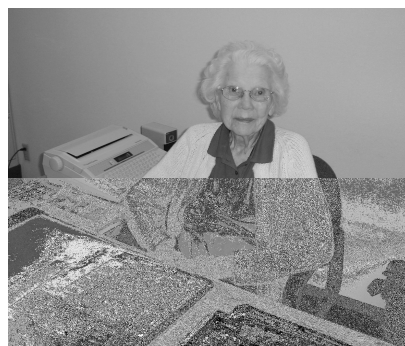


Congratulations to **Phyllis Oxendine**, who was selected 2006 Volunteer of the Year at Brothers of Mercy. She tends to the facility's plants, creates charming photo displays, helps activities staff prepare programs, accompanies residents on outings, helps transport rehab patients to appointments, advises new volunteers until they feel at home, delivers mail, and has contributed more than 9500 hours to Brothers of Mercy!

RSVP was "live on the air" on **WNED** not once but twice this Fall---- because RSVP volunteers answered the call (or e-mail) to serve! WNED generously provides on-air exposure during the membership pledge drive for agencies like RSVP, who bring a team of volunteers to take telephone pledges for a few hours. The phone calls kept us busy, and we had a lot of fun while helping to raise funds for WNED. Thanks to the following volunteers and Advisory Council members who made it possible to spread the word about RSVP: **Elaine Wolf; Eileen Driscoll; Shirley Bowens; Pat Matsui** (and her husband); **Derrick Byrd, Jr.; Bob and Karen Flumerfeldt; Mike Petrinc** (and his wife); and **Fern Koch**. Special thanks too, to **Lisa Napier**, WNED Volunteer Director and RSVP Advisory Council member, for providing this opportunity, and to RSVP volunteer **Bob Semrau**, for his excellent training on how to take pledges on WNED's new computers!

Happy Belated Birthday to RSVP volunteer **Helen Bommer**--- who turned 100 years old on December 5! Helen volunteers at the West Seneca Senior Center assisting with the congregate meal program.

Helen really shows that volunteers do live healthier and longer!



**The Erie County Lifelong Learning Program begins a new semester in late March.** We are always eager to speak to any retired faculty or other professional interested in volunteering to give a lecture or short course at a senior center for students age 60 and over. If you would be interested in teaching a class---or taking a class---please contact the RSVP office at 858-7548. The complete class schedule will be on-line at [www.erie.gov/rsvp](http://www.erie.gov/rsvp) by March.

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**You're invited to** a special Lifelong Learning event:**CULTURAL HERITAGE TREASURES: PRESERVING OUR PAST, SHARING OUR STORY** featuring speakers on great architecture in the Buffalo area and the potential for our region to become a cultural heritage destination. Audience members can visit display tables of cultural heritage sites to learn how to get involved by volunteering. Join us **Wednesday, April 18** from **9am – 11:45am** at the Cheektowaga Senior Center at Broadway and Union. The event is free and open to all Erie County residents age 60 and over. Reservations are required— call RSVP at 858-7548 or e-mail [dowlingp@erie.gov](mailto:dowlingp@erie.gov).

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**Tuesday, February 27 10 am FREE Session: Learn to Protect Yourself**  
Central Library, Central Meeting Room, One Lafayette Square.

Identity theft occurs when someone uses your personal information without your permission to commit fraud or other crimes. There are steps you can take to minimize your risk.

Financial exploitation is illegal or improper use of an older person's funds, property, or resources such as taking money or property, forging an older person's signature, or getting an older person to sign a deed, will, or power of attorney through deception, coercion, or undue influence. Learn about the forms of elder abuse, signs abuse has occurred, and how Protective Services for Adults can help, as well as FBI and District Attorney's Office. Call 858-2117 to register.

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**RSVP now has a new, shorter website address!**  
**[www.erie.gov/rsvp](http://www.erie.gov/rsvp)**

See photos from Tribute Day, past newsletters, current opportunities, and more...

RSVP of Erie County  
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